1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will address the relationship between perceived service quality and relationship commitment for professional business services. We will do this by integrating two current research streams: Service quality literature within the field of services marketing and relationship literature within the field of business marketing.

In services literature, service quality research has become paramount. The current customer-based service quality concept is regarded not only as important for differentiation purposes and thus getting new customers (Parasuraman et al. 1985), but also as an important determinant for the retention of existing customers. Service quality is found to be related to repurchase intentions either directly or indirectly through its influence on customer satisfaction (Bolton & Drew 1991, Boulding et al. 1993, Rust & Zahorik 1993, Cronin & Taylor 1994, Liljander & Strandvik 1994).

The traditional service quality research is mostly approached from a transaction perspective, with the focus on the quality of a service transaction and its consequences for subsequent service transactions. In line with the recent relationship paradigm...
(Gronroos 1990), however, we will take a relationship perspective to service quality and study whether and how service quality contributes to the maintenance or enhancement of long-term customer relationships. Recently, some authors have argued that service quality also enhances the building and maintenance of long-term customer relationships (Rust & Zahorik 1993, Anderson & Fornell 1994) and contributes to customer loyalty (Storbacka & Strandvik 1994, Liljander & Strandvik 1995, Strandvik 1995).

Relationship development and maintenance is described and analysed in the recent body of relationship research on business markets, initiated by the IMP group (Hakansson 1982, Ford 1990). Business relationships are identified as dynamic phenomena that have to be initiated, developed and maintained (Dwyer et al 1987). For relationships to be maintained not only customers' (intended) repurchase behaviour is important, but rather the attitude on which the behaviour is based. This attitude, referred to as relationship commitment, is regarded as crucial in the development of a relationship, which has been ascribed to ensure the strength, stability, durability and even profitability of a relationship (Dwyer et al. 1987, Wilson & Mummalaneni 1990, Morgan & Hunt 1994).

Although most authors agree on the importance of commitment for relationship maintenance and enhancement, its conceptualization is still quite diverse. In this paper we will apply one of its recent conceptualizations and propose its usefulness for professional business service relationships. We will then review some of the most frequent cited antecedents and we will study the importance of service quality next to these antecedents.

In our study we address the proposed relationship between service quality and relationship commitment for advertising services. We will first discuss service quality perception for professional business services, a sector which has received relatively little attention in service quality research so far. We will then discuss relationship maintenance and our conceptualization of relationship commitment and its most important
Relationship Maintenance in the Professional Business Services Sector:  
The Role of Perceived Service Quality

antecedents based on current relationship literature. Propos­
sitions will be formulated regarding dimensions of relationship  
commitment and the factors that contribute to the development  
of commitment in professional business service relationships.

These propositions are studied in the advertising market in  
Holland, where we conducted a qualitative and quantitative  
study among customers of advertising agencies. Preliminary  
results of this study will be presented and discussed in light of  
our propositions.

2. SERVICE QUALITY OF PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS  
SERVICES

Although much research has been conducted on the subject of  
services quality, the concept is still elusive and no universally  
accepted definition of service quality exists. The currently  
predominating conceptualization of service quality contains that  
it is an evaluative judgement by the customer, based on the  
(dis)confirmation of his/her expectations, i.e. , the discrepancy or  
'gap' between what customers expected of a service and what  
they experience during the service encounter (Parasuraman et  
all. 1985, 1990). It has been defined as the customer's judgement  
of the overall excellence or superiority of a service, comparable  
to an attitude (Bitner 1990, Bolton & Drew 1994), which is based  
on the accumulation of all previous experiences with the service  
provider and is relatively stable over time (Bolton & Drew  
1991). It is thus different from 'actual' or 'objective' quality, but  
rather a subjective and customer-based concept, referred to as  
perceived service quality.

The extensive body of research on service quality focussed  
mainly on traditional (consumer) services. Professional services  
in general, and professional business services in particular have  
received very little attention so far (Lapierre & Filiatreault  
1995). Although these services have long been protected by  
government regulations and performance was controlled by  
industry and profesional standards (accountants, lawyers etc.),  
recent deregulations and increasing (international) competition
call for a different, more customer oriented approach for these services. It has been argued that also for these services service quality is an important means to enhance customer satisfaction, repurchase intentions and loyalty (Day et all. 1988, Morgan 1991, Bojanic 1991, Patterson 1995). The conceptualization of service quality for these services should thus shift from their traditional focus on industry or professional standards to the customer based perspective that is used in other (consumer) services. In our research we will use a customer-based conceptualization of service quality for professional business services, and study whether it indeed influences the relationship.

3. RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

From a relationship perspective, a relationship starts to develop when the relation goes beyond discrete transactions 'reflecting an ongoing process' (Dwyer et all 1987). Transactions do not necessarily have to be frequent or repeated, as long as both parties have bilateral expectations of future exchange.

The development and maintenance of close relationships thus is not only reflected by the (intended) behaviour, but more so by the attitude towards the relationship; referred to as relationship commitment. All process models of relationship development in business relationships (Ford 1980, Dwyer et all 1987, Wilson & Mummalaneni 1988) identify commitment as the crucial variable for relationship maintenance and enhancement. Also for services it has recently been argued that commitment is different from loyalty in service relationships. Commitment refers to the attitude and intentions to interact, whereas loyalty only reflects repurchase behaviour (Liljander & Strandvik,1995).

Although most authors agree on the importance of relationship commitment, there is less agreement as to its conceptualization. Commitment is usually regarded as an affective disposition, reflecting the desire of the parties to keep the relationship, and their willingness to put maximum effort in its continuation (Morgan & Hunt 1994, Anderson & Weitz 1992).
However, recently it has been acknowledged that commitment is a multi-dimensional concept, and that parties can be willing to continue the relationship for different reasons. On the one hand it consists of the affective component, which refers to the desire to keep the relationship for its own sake. But on the other hand it has a calculative component, which refers to the perceived need to keep the relationship, which results from the cold calculation of benefits and costs of the relation taking the expected switch costs and available alternatives into account (Geyskens & Steenkamp 1995, Kumar, Hibbard & Stern 1994). These components can exist independently from each other, implying that customers might want to continue a relationship because they feel they need to but not necessarily feel a desire to, or vice versa (Geyskens & Steenkamp 1995). Although the desire to continue is important for a cohesive relation to occur (Young & Denize 1994), if there is no need, clients might switch more easily to an attractive alternatives (Turnbull & Wilson 1989).

To distinguish commitment from mere inertia, we will define it as a party’s intentional continuation of a business relationship, which not only reflects the intentions to continue a relationship, but also the deliberateness of these intentions. We argue that affective as well as calculative motivations can underly the intention to deliberately continue a relationship and both will thus be related to the maintenance of the relation.

Based on this we will propose that also for professional business services:

Proposition 1: Relationship commitment is multidimensional, consisting of an affective and a calculative component.
4. ANTECEDENTS TO COMMITMENT

As mentioned in the introduction, some authors recently argued that perceived service quality will enhance the building and maintenance of long-term customer relationships (Anderson & Fornell 1994, Rust & Zahorik 1993). Storbacka & Strandvik (1994) argue that service quality will influence satisfaction, which, in turn, will influence relationship commitment. Perceived service quality will increase customers' desire and willingness to start and maintain a relationship with a particular service provider.

Although in industrial marketing the concept of service quality is never used, the relationship development models assume that initial interactions between parties will only start to intensify and continue into a relationship, if the interactions are considered as satisfactory (Wilson & Mummalaneni 1988). Since perceived service quality and satisfaction are closely related, the importance of perceived service quality can also be inferred from this literature.

However, over time, the parties will build a history that in itself might influence the future continuation. Over time and different interactions, parties will make investments and adaptations to the relationship and each other, which will create bonds that tie the parties together. Wilson & Mummalaneni (1986) argued that the investments made to the relationship and the availability of alternatives to the customer, will influence customers' commitment independently from their satisfaction with the provider. Research in business-to-business relationships indicates that different kinds of bonds can be created during the course of a relationship, like technological bonds, social bonds, knowledge bonds, economic bonds, planning bonds and legal bonds, that can tie the parties together. In business relationships considerable investments can be made into equipment, technology or personnel to make a relationship more productive or efficient, which become a tie of their own, regardless of the actual efficiencies or productivity they've induced.
In professional business services, however, usually very few investments are required by the customer, apart from the costs of the service delivery. However, since most professional services are customized and focussed on solving customer-specific problems, customers and providers invest in the build-up of client-specific knowledge, which lies at the heart of the core service to be rendered now and in the future. Furthermore, because of the perceived risk and uncertainty associated with professional services, clients can reduce this uncertainty by maintaining relationships with familiar providers. Also the intensive interactions and customer participation needed during the long service production processes, create the opportunity for social bonds to develop.

Thus the knowledge, familiarity and social ties that are build during the course of the relation, as well as the switch costs can become bonds of their own that act as switch barriers, independently from the quality of or satisfaction with the delivered services. This implies that even if a client is less satisfied s/he might desire or be willing to continue the relationship because of the anticipated risk and costs of leaving or because s/he values the knowledge and expertise or social bond that has been established.

Because these bonds and investments expose parties to dependence and make them vulnerable to the actions by the other party, trust is needed for a relationship to be maintained. Trust is regarded as a valuable asset in a relationship that reduces the perceived uncertainties and risk. It is slowly built over time, and will become a relational bond in itself that makes the parties want to keep the relationship. Trust is regarded as and has continuously been found to be an important antecedent to commitment (Morgan & Hunt 1994, Ganesan 1994, Anderson & weitz 1992, Geyskens & Steenkamp 1995, Dwyer et all 1987).

We thus propose that in professional business relationships:
Proposition 2a: Perceived service quality is positively related to customers' relationship commitment

Proposition 2b: Bonds (social, economic and knowledge) are positively related to customers' relationship commitment

Proposition 2c: Trust is positively related to customers' relationship commitment

Figure 1: Model of Relationship Commitment

Proposition 2d: All three antecedents are related independently to customers' relationship commitment

5. RESEARCH METHOD

These propositions were explored on the advertising market in Holland. We conducted a qualitative study consisting of in-depth interviews with agencies, advertisers and experts in the field. Based on this research we developed a questionnaire which we used in our quantitative research. In the fall of 1995 we approached 1,110 marketing and communication managers of advertising companies, belonging to 705 different client organisations, with the questionnaire. The organisations and respondents were selected through two channels: 1)Through the
dutch trade association for advertisers and 2) through cooperating agencies belonging to the trade association of large agencies and the trade association of medium to small agencies.

The questionnaire was send by mail and were personally addressed to the persons that have direct contact with their advertising agencies. After 2-4 weeks a reminder was sent.

The questionnaire contained questions about the perceived service quality of the advertising agency, and about the relationship with their agency.

Based on a literature review and our qualitative study we constructed measures for 1) perceived service quality of the agency, 2) the social, knowledge and economic bonds that have been established in the agency relationship, 3) clients' trust in their agency and 4) clients' commitment to their agency with items reflecting affective and calculative commitment. All construct were measured by multiple items. These measures were pretested on a small sample in a pilot study.

6. RESULTS

The data are now being analyzed. Preliminary results will be reported during the conference.
7. REFERENCES


HŒkansson, HÅkan (eds.) (1982), International marketing and purchasing of industrial goods:An interaction approach. By IMP project Group, Chichester, Wiley


Lapierre, Jozee & Filiatrault, Pierre (1995),"An Analysis of the Foundations of Research on the Quality of Professional Services to Organizations", in: Lemmink & Kunst,


Strandvik, Tore (1995), Tolerance Zones in Perceived Service Quality, Dissertation Research Nr. 58, Helsingfors, Publication of Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration


